

# UP FROM THE RUBBLE

Tornado survivor  
Rock It Out is thriving

story by **Kimberly A. Rinker**







**DEC. 10, 2021,** began like most other days for Standardbred trainer Donna Holt.

The Kentucky-based conditioner was at her farm—just across the road from her father’s property—tending to her horses, cleaning stalls and working in the barn. Their adjoined homesteads lay just a few miles west of the hamlet of Benton, 18 miles northeast of Mayfield in the far northwest corner of the Bluegrass State.

“We have 15 acres, a track and a barn,” Holt said. “I have a few broodmares and babies, and the barn will house six horses comfortably. I give my

racehorses a lot of turnout time, and when I get done racing them, I bring them home for a little R and R.”

Holt’s house was on one side of the driveway and her father’s home on the other, with the barn and paddocks located in the back. The 55-year-old horsewoman began conditioning horses in 2015 and to date has 103 wins and \$783,095 in career earnings from 756 starts.

“We had been racing at Oak Grove on Dec. 6, and I brought some of the horses home,” Holt said. “The sky had been looking worse and worse as the day went on, and then I heard on the radio that we were under a tornado

**STORM WARNING** / The tornado that struck the property of Donna Holt and her dad, Junior Holt, in northwest Kentucky on Dec. 10, 2021, was among the most lethal in the state’s history, killing 57 people. A six-stall barn (*above*) was among the structures the storm destroyed on the Holts’ 15 acres. **Opposite:** It took hours for Holt, with the help of her sons, to free her mare Rock It Out from the barn wreckage that was pinning the pacer down.





warning, so I put the horses in the barn because I thought they'd be safer there.

"The news had been telling us that we were going to get bad storms for about two weeks, and I was hesitating, but something told me to put them in the barn."

One of those horses was Rock It Out p,5,1:49.4f (\$267,759), a then 4-year-old daughter of Rockin Image-Musette Mindale. Tropical Tracey p,3,1:51.1s (\$74,736), a daughter of Always A Virgin-Christine's Return, was also at Holt's farm after racing at Oak Grove that fall.

As the skies darkened and tornado sirens started blaring, Holt left the farm, but could not persuade her father to join her.

"I went to my son's house because he had a basement," Donna said. "My dad refused to leave his but got into his truck instead. When the tornado hit, he

**LOOKING UP / Above:** Holt said she was not sure how Rock It Out would take to racing after her misadventures, but the mare, now 6, has put her owner-trainer's doubts to rest with some solid performances since returning to the track in the spring of last year. **Opposite:** Among the many people who helped the Holts get back on their feet after the tornado were members of an Amish community in Indiana which sent two crews to build a new barn in a single day.

was still in the truck, and it picked him up and spun him around and then put him back on the ground."

Miraculously, cell phone towers in the area remained intact, and Junior, Holt's father, was able to call his daughter immediately after the tornado had passed, just after 9:30 p.m. that evening.

"I'll never forget his words," she said, her voice cracking a bit. "He just said, 'Everything's gone.'"

**THE** tornado began earlier in the day as part of a string of high winds in the Mississippi Valley, crossing into Arkansas and into western Tennessee by 3 p.m. Doppler radar records indicate that tornado reached Hickman County (Mayfield) just after 9 p.m., at which time it began to intensify before heading into Marshall County (Benton). The National



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*Donna Holt*

Weather Service issued 149 tornado warnings that night in total.

“I drove back home as quick as I could but wasn’t able to get up to the property right away as there were so many live power lines and trees down everywhere,” Holt said.

She did not reach her father until the following morning.

“The guys from the electric company showed up to remove the live power wires that had become entangled around Dad’s truck,” Holt noted. “I was determined to get up to the barn, but it wasn’t easy because so many trees were blocking the road and making it almost impossible to get through. When I reached the spot where my dad’s house and workshop was, they were gone. When I got to where my house had been, it was gone. I started panicking when thinking about my horses and

where they might be or what had happened to them.”

Ignoring the warnings of rescue workers, she bolted from her truck and maneuvered on foot through fallen trees and massive amounts of debris in an attempt to locate her horses. Scattered pieces of aluminum and wood hung tenuously from uprooted trees while sparking power lines danced menacingly through the wet grass.

“It took them 12 hours to get all the lines cleared, and my dad had to sit in his truck while the rescue guys worked to clear the lines from around the truck,” Holt said.

Eventually, Holt made it to where the barn had once stood. Her sons, Justin, 31, and Jacob, 28, had arrived before her.

“They didn’t want me to see the barn,” Holt said. “But once I got to

where they were, the horses heard my voice and they started nickering, and I realized that they were buried alive. But everything else was absolutely gone. My dad’s house, my house and the barn looked just like it had exploded. There were two posts sticking out of the ground and a small part of the barn wall was still kind of attached. Even the road leading to the barn was gone.”

**NEXT,** Holt and her boys had to figure out exactly where the horses were located within the rubble, and how they were going to get them out.

“We didn’t know where to start at first,” Holt said. “We began by trying to move all the debris with the tractors and whatever else we could use, but the first thing we did was to make a small walkway leading down



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to the horses. I could see that there were steel beams and twisted metal all over the place. Rock It Out's stall was literally on top of her, and we had to put chains on the boards to pull them up and out. It's amazing that her legs didn't get sliced up."

Tropical Tracey was not so lucky. Some of the screws from the barn roof had imbedded themselves into the mare's back and her nasal bone was broken.

"Tracey literally had screws in her back that were impaled there from the storm," Holt said. "They had to be removed surgically after we got her out. When I first was able to get a good look at Rock It Out and where she was in the debris, I could see that the barn had collapsed down over her head and went between her front legs. She was sunk down low and resting her head on a bale of hay. That may have saved her life or kept her neck from being broken."

Another mare, Ashlee's Joy, made it out of the rubble with only minor scrapes and scratches. Holt's two broodmares, Arts-Rockstar and Triple Lane

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*Donna Holt*

Melody, were standing together on the other side of the barn—where a stall once stood, there was now nothing.

“Triple Lane Melody's baby, Triple Revenge, had recently been weaned and had been in a stall next to her mother,” Holt said. “The tornado had pulled her up out of the barn and dropped her

far away from the barn, on the road. We found her just standing down there.”

**HOLT** and her sons worked through the night to rescue the trapped mares. Eventually, piece by piece, they extracted the horses from the debris holding them

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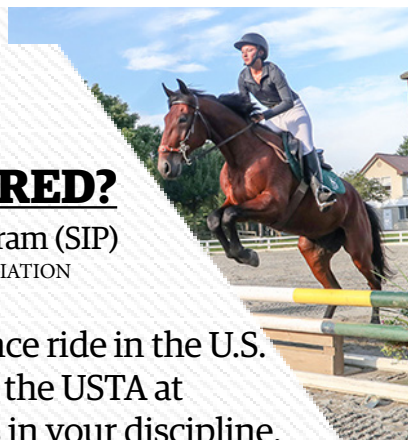
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captive.

"They were all exhausted and scared, but happy to come out of the hole they were stuck in," Holt said. "It took a big effort to coax them out, especially Rock It Out, because she does not like to back up, and we had to back her out of there to get her out, but the trust they had in me helped."

The mares stayed with Holt's veterinarian, Dr. Kim Abernathy, for a month to recover.

"Rock It Out had a cut on her head above her eye and some on her heels and a cut on her stifle," Holt said. "There were a lot of superficial wounds on the mares; it's amazing they weren't all killed. Tracey required surgery to remove those screws in her back and it was apparent she would never race again."

While her horses were recovering, Holt herself had to take time to assess her situation. The tornadoes had devastated not only her family's property but nearly all of Mayfield and Benton, killing 22 of her neighbors and injuring hundreds more. The catastrophic

damage caused by the EF4 tornado, which had a three-hour lifespan and traveled 165 miles, was one of the deadliest in Kentucky history, directly killing 57 people. Kentucky governor Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency the following morning, with President Biden approving disaster relief funds for the area.

"Besides our homes being gone, I had bought a brand-new horse trailer a few weeks before, and we found that over in my neighbor's pond. It was completely trashed," Holt said. "Also, what I had loved about our property was that we had these great big oak trees all over the place that provided us with a lot of shade. The tornado took all of them; we don't have a one now."

**IN** a situation such as this, there are so many questions and few answers, Holt admitted.

"Where do you start?" she said.

She didn't have to wait long for an answer. Neighbors, fellow horsepeople, a network of Amish friends, and local church folk quickly came to lend a

hand, helping to get her life back in order. Another friend set up a GoFundMe page to help raise money, and a group of horsepeople at Hawthorne Race Course began an account for monetary donations.

"The outpouring of support and help was overwhelming," Holt said. "I was one of the lucky ones in that so many people came forward. When you lose everything—the way we did—you just have no idea where to begin to rebuild."

An Indiana Amish community, many of whom were friends with Holt, reached out that first week.

"They offered to build me a new barn," she explained. "They said, 'If you get the materials, we'll put the barn up for you.' I had raced with many of those Amish guys in Indiana at the fairs and had good relationships with them. They came out and measured everything and told me what kind of materials I needed, and they brought a bunch of guys out—two crews, actually—and they built me a new barn in one day.

"The Amish women and their

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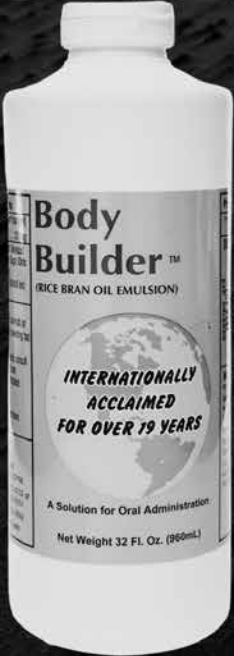
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children came, and they walked the pasture and helped pick up all the trash that was scattered around. If they hadn't helped me, I'd still be trying to get a barn built.

"The people from our local church came forward and re-fenced all of my pastures for me. I still have some work to be done, but they made the areas workable so that my horses can enjoy their pastures.

"Also, I had to have something for my dad and myself to live in, so I bought a little camper for myself until I can build a house, and I bought a modular home for my dad, who is in his 70s," Holt continued. "It's tough because we were not the only people affected by the tornado, and there's a long list of people waiting to have their homes rebuilt or to have new homes put up.

"My house was opened up like a book with pages thrown everywhere, so the insurance folks demolished it completely, and I have to wait a bit to rebuild. The weird thing is, the neighbors across the road from us had almost no damage, but the subdivision around the corner from us is completely gone. It's like something went in there and tilled it to the ground. There's no rhyme or reason why the tornado did what it did."

**CLOSE** to two months passed before Holt began jogging Rock It Out, preparing her for the 2022 season.

"We started back real slow with her," Holt said. "We took her to the spa and had some chiropractic work done on her, and it paid off. She didn't seem to be any different despite the ordeal that she endured."

Rock It Out had earned \$148,265 prior to her 2022 campaign. Holt said she wasn't sure how the trauma of the tornado had affected her, but by May 1 she knew the mare was ready to get back to racing.

"She had always been pretty consistent," Holt said. "She paced in 1:54.2 at Hoosier Park late in her 2-year-old season and earned \$24,125, and then raced in the (Indiana) Sires Stakes at 3. By the time she was 4, in 2021, she had graduated to the Filly and Mare Opens. She averaged \$60,000 a year as a 3- and 4-year-old."

Prior to her misadventure, Rock

It Out scored a 1:51.4 mark on July 4, 2020, at Hoosier in a \$33,500 ISS Leg, and then lowered that record to 1:51 on Sept. 1, 2021, in a \$17,500 Hoosier Fillies and Mares Open. But how she would return to the ranks of competition remained to be seen.

"I really wasn't sure what to expect from her, but she picked right up like nothing had ever happened," Holt said. "In just her fifth start back, she won the Open at Oak Grove in 1:51.2 (on June 7), and then two weeks later won again, this time in 1:49.4 going for \$22,000. Ashlee's Joy, who was trapped down there with Rock It Out, also won that same day in 1:51.4."

Rock It Out continued to excel in the Opens and high conditioned events at Oak Grove, Hawthorne, the Red Mile and The Meadows in 2022, ending the season by adding \$54,334 to her pocketbook with four wins from 18 starts—and only one missed check all season.

And remember Triple Revenge, the weanling who was plucked out of the barn and taken down the road by the tornado? She's now 2, and she has earned \$24,245 this season while recording a mark of 1:58.3h.

"Rock It Out is simply an amazing individual who continues to defy what happened to her," Holt said. "The same can be said for Triple Revenge. After being taken out of the barn that way, it's unbelievable that she's even able to race."

Rock It Out is still just as tenacious in her 6-year-old season, adding another \$65,160 to her bankroll and pushing her career account to \$267,759. She continues to race at the top level and recorded a seasonal mark of 1:50 at Oak Grove on May 14.

"This mare is as sweet as they come," said Holt. "Kids can play with her, and she won't do anything to get them hurt, but when it comes to racing, it's almost like she has some kind of internal determination that nothing will get her down. It's like she's saying, 'I'm not going to let this thing that put me underground beat me down.' Maybe surviving the tornado did that for her."

The same could be said for Holt. **HB**

**Kimberly A. Rinker** is a longtime Standard-bred industry journalist and former Standard-bred trainer. To comment on this story, email us at [readerforum@ustrotting.com](mailto:readerforum@ustrotting.com).